

Article

The entrepreneurial self [Book Review]

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Book review: Bröckling U (2016) *The Entrepreneurial Self*, London, UK: SAGE Publications, 234 pages, ISBN978-1-4739-0234-3(pbk)

Much of the critical management literature indicates that governance of the human subject is prompted by a strategy of appropriating and shaping-to-fit certain entrepreneurial discourses that urge the subject to accumulate human capital for and by them. *The Entrepreneurial Self* by Ulrich Bröckling focuses upon this project and the “the rationale and rationalizations, the programmes and technologies that pretend to come to people’s aid by telling them how to live their lives” (Bröckling 2016: 22).

The *entrepreneurial self* is a construct deriving from economics and “strategies of mobilizing people” (Bröckling 2016: xvi). It is neither an *ideal type* nor “empirically observable” (Bröckling 2016: 20) but rather an appeal that shapes, alters, produces and reproduces the subject in a particular mould. Bröckling’s particular purpose for this project is to examine the model of subjectification through historically current practices of government and self-government; it is a “research program” (2016: 18) which concerns “...how theories and programmes mobilizing the *entrepreneurial self* are disseminated and how they gain credibility across political, social and academic divides” (2016: 22). *The Entrepreneurial Self* is therefore a genealogy of what we are urged to become and the influences and shapers of that putative being.

Although first published in German, *The Entrepreneurial Self* has been readably translated into English by Steven Black and is an interesting and useful framing of twenty first century existence, and an important contribution to the literature on the human subject. Building upon his own interests and earlier writing, Bröckling argues that the *entrepreneurial self*, although unattainable, is a locus for the confluence of governmentality, and technologies of self. The technologies, “strategies and programmes”, that Bröckling selects to illustrate his argument and purposes are those “...that pretend to come to people’s aid by telling them how to live their lives” (2016: 22). Bröckling selects four technologies for particular attention: these are *creativity, empowerment, quality and projects*, and for each one he presents a genealogy of each. Thus the book comprises nested genealogies.

Bröckling sets out his thesis for each chapter, introducing figures most associated with the subject, discussing and explaining points of agreement and divergence. Many of the authors are well-known, by name, if not by a detailed understanding; however, the compelling nature of the ideas stimulates a desire to explore previously unknown literatures. That is how persuasive and strong the writing is, and the book should appeal to a wide audience.

The text follows three parts. The first (curiously not called Part One) appears as two chapters which lay the ground for what is to come. Chapter One explains the genealogical method and the contributions made by Foucault and others; Chapter Two explains the genealogy of the subject as *entrepreneur* and some of the alternative, contemporary views.

Chapters Three, Four and Five, which do form Part 1, are genealogical inquiries into key variants of neoliberal thinking (Chapter Three), the entrepreneur (Chapter Four), and contractualism (Chapter Five). Chapter Three explains the origins and the heterogeneity of thinking on neo-liberalism; however, what binds the neoliberal theories is “market mobilization”, and it is the market place where the *entrepreneurial self* is encouraged to emerge. Chapter Four discusses the entrepreneur as a desired model for the subject and Bröckling concludes this chapter with the hint of the menace of fear which stalks the market place due to the prospect of inevitable failure, because the subject is never adequate or capable of being finished. In Chapter Five, Bröckling explores the nature of contractual relationships in society and their primacy within a competitive market place.

The concepts of market, competition and entrepreneurial characteristics occur throughout society and Bröckling illustrates what he means by examining the four strategies for the *entrepreneurial self* which form the foci of the next four chapters, making up Part 2 of the book. Here Bröckling selects Creativity (Chapter Six), Empowerment (Chapter Seven), Quality (Chapter Eight) and Projects (Chapter Nine) for particular attention. Each of these is both a mechanism and a goal for the *entrepreneurial self*, and readers from a business or management school will recognise the significance or ubiquity of these discourses. In the conclusion, Chapter Ten, Bröckling reiterates the view that the *entrepreneurial self* is a siren call, a direct address, to the human, and it is “totalitarian”. The *entrepreneurial self* is, however, an illusion, perhaps a

delusion, "...as the demands cannot be finally fulfilled, all efforts are unsatisfactory and since they are ill adapted to the real world, they result in unintended effects" (2016: 197). Bröckling calls these "slippages in the word-to-world fit" (2016: 197) which of itself suggests a spiral of failure. The power of the *entrepreneurial self* lies in the gap between what is set up for the individual as the desired and the constant failure to meet it. It is, however, within that gap where the subject can exercise freedom *not* to be shaped in this way. Bröckling conceives of the entrepreneurial regimes such as the ones highlighted in the book as a force field. The aspirant *entrepreneurial self* has freedom to make choices from a menu dictated by the market, but there is also the freedom *not* to choose and to "disturb the field of force" (2016: 200). By uncovering the origins of technologies of entrepreneurialism, laying them bare to scrutiny, Bröckling resists the force field through tactics shown by the ideas and by his writing, and in so doing engages readers to follow suit.

Bröckling makes several important contributions in a rich text. One highlight is the development of the neoliberal themes of market, competition, and the virtues of the entrepreneurial model. Neoliberal strategies have coerced previously recalcitrant participants to take part in the market, to be open to competition. Bröckling shows how the discourses of entrepreneurialism coerce the subject to become an expert of self, and become their own elite expert. Therefore in this genealogy, Bröckling shows how even the recalcitrant can become active self-initiating participants in the market – entrepreneurialism for Everyman.

The entrepreneurial model concerns the commercialisation of the contractual relationship and Bröckling foregrounds the present place of the contract in society, how it exists *within* institutions rather than providing links between institutions. To make progress, the *entrepreneurial self* has to contract with others and themselves. He observes how contracts are constantly being remade as parties fail in their transactions with one another and in a further development relevant to the *entrepreneurial self*, Bröckling sees the interiorization of multiple contracts so that they constitute the *entrepreneurial self*. Although there is freedom to enter and participate in a market place, as established in the earlier chapters, Bröckling further observes that contractualism denies freedom, and promotes unequal relations and inequalities.

Bröckling shows how the notion of the *entrepreneurial self* is not the same as a disciplinary regime, because it addresses the human directly and calls them to accept that “self-realization and economic success, desire and duty” (2016: 202) can be attained, even though there is great cost and the opposite is true. He points out that the consequences of trying to attain entrepreneurialism for Everyman are constant inadequacy and failure.

A methodological contribution is the genealogy of some of those key discourses and technologies highlighted in the text. The chapters focusing on empowerment, quality, creativity and the project are welcome additions to any reading list for postgraduate HRM studies. Complementary texts could include Hanlon (2014 and 2016) in which the entrepreneur is seen not so much as being productive in creating value, as capturing the value laid down by others, and as such the notion of entrepreneurialism can be seen as something both rapacious and diminishing.

Although this is a text which encompasses thinking about a wide range of social life and human experience, the very subject, “*the entrepreneurial self*” and its formation and reproduction in a market place, indicates contradictions. Bröckling exposes the absurd contradictions in the notions and injunctions to the *entrepreneurial self*. For example, he shows the extent to which the privileging of business and in particular the risk taking, yet measured and self-controlled entrepreneur, really does permeate every aspect of modern human existence, particularly in a developed context. Paradoxes, tensions and contradictions are nothing new to scholars who study general management or HRM from a critical perspective, however, through this inquiry of highlighted strategies, Bröckling amplifies many of these paradoxes, tensions and contradictions, and as an academic working in critical HRM, it was not difficult to find common ground with Bröckling’s arguments and see how the discourses in modern HRM are complicit in the making and remaking of a particular kind of worker. These ideas are particularly resonant in the discourse mechanisms of creativity and empowerment.

The interpellation of the *entrepreneurial self* is an important thesis because the stimulus towards that end comes about not through state desires and dictates, but from the power of enabling strategies and schemes that suggest that this is the way humans are expected and encouraged to be now. The depressing point is

that there is no end – it is a constant search, the product is never good enough. We set ourselves up for failure unless the force field that is the entrepreneurial arena is disrupted.

This book is finely argued and richly sourced even though some of the sources may not be wholly accessible for non-German speakers. The structure and account of the practice of the genealogical method in unravelling the key themes make this text useful for reading in its entirety in order to appreciate the sweep of the argument. However, given the clarity of explanation of the key themes, the book may also be consulted separately on particular aspects, such as genealogy, neoliberal thinking and the common topics found in academic programmes such as empowerment and quality.

The ideas Bröckling offers find parallels in earlier and contemporary writing. For example, Hanlon (2016: 187) has also observed how neoliberalism transforms through time and in different places but has as its end the “moral rejuvenation of the subject”. These are similar ideas about the production and reproduction of the subject through moulding the interior world of the human through elite expertise and competition. The effect of pervasive competition is to “mould and modulate behaviour” (Hanlon (2016: 193). However, Bröckling’s project is different, particularly because of the method of investigation.

The only critique to be found in my opinion concerned the use of the feminine pronoun. In 2005 Bröckling had begun to draw attention to the gendered way in which females were constituted as *entrepreneurial selves*. In *The Entrepreneurial Self* the use of the feminine pronoun as the appellant of *the entrepreneurial self* seemed unnecessary, as it was not clear what it contributed to an otherwise important argument. Nevertheless, *The Entrepreneurial Self* is an important addition to the canon on subjectivity addressing the current and persistent appeal to entrepreneurialism, the spirit of enterprise and entrepreneurial values in the making and remaking of the subject. The book should have a wide appeal to any scholar interested in this phenomenon, whether from a sociological, critical management, or critical human resource management perspective.

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